

The Theatre Centre  
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## Critical Response to the Round Table Discussion at the 2004 Free Fall Festival

by Sam Stedman

Why are open forums so difficult to mould into productive experiences? This is an important question that cuts to the heart of any notion of community – a central concern of the Free Fall Festival. It is the purpose of this critical response to continue the Free Fall discussion in a more focussed fashion, hopefully generating the basis for a continuing discourse by picking up on some of the issues that were raised but left unexplored. To this end, it is imperative that you take on the role of a resistant reader not easily convinced of my arguments, and if you find yourself in disagreement, I hope you will think it through beyond a reactionary antagonism, for only in this way is a healthy community formed and sustained.

RoseLee Goldberg kicked off the discussion with a short history of the last one hundred years of avant-garde, interdisciplinary performance. The justification of this keynote address was the question of knowing one's own lineage, though the reasons for which were left, for me, frustratingly unexplored and unjustified. In fact, the discussion seemed only to elucidate two possible positions: 1) so that you know that someone did something very similar to what you're doing, but several decades ago or 2) so that we can stop incessantly 're-inventing the wheel'. Are these positions defensible? If so, on what grounds? If not, why not?

Let us begin with the first. Are questions of history and lineage being asked of contemporary experimental artists? In general, I believe the answer to be a resounding 'no', except by a handful of academics. But there is such inherited and sustained antagonism between academics and artists – perpetuated by a comment made by a participant in the discussion (something antagonistic toward an academic approach to the arts) who, ironically, happens to teach at the University of Toronto – that the impact is negligible. Does the audience of such work have a comprehensive knowledge of said lineage? A trickier question, given that it is generally largely composed of other artists and a handful of performance art groupies – not the more expansive cross-section of the social strata that one might find at Canadian Stage, a Mirvish production, or more poignantly, a movie theatre. Here, I believe the answer to be a conditional 'no', for some experimental artists that I have encountered have significant knowledge of avant-garde practices, while others have not. But if such knowledge is not widely spread and utilized then its potential benefits cannot, on the whole, be felt, and it loses the perception of importance.

It was proposed that the reason for this may have been an inheritance from the dada tradition, its focus on alogicality (beyond logic) obliterating any need for history. This may very well have

some validity – the avant-garde interdisciplinary tradition is rooted in a rejection of linear narratives grounded in logic – but from a certain historico-political standpoint, dada can be seen as a kind of fluffy sequel to the heavily politicized Futurist movement that inspired it. The desire to annihilate history propounded by the Futurists was in direct reaction to the relatively new Naturalist movement forged by such pioneers as Chekhov, Stanislavski, Ibsen, Strindberg, Antione, and Zola, among other lesser-known figures. Interdisciplinarity, as embodied by the avant-garde, sprang from a violent rejection of work that made the audience believe in the unity and coherence of the world which could serve as nothing but an agent of the dumbing-down and making passive of society as a whole. While dada may have implicitly carried these ideas forward, their desire to maintain the integrity of their beliefs has left us (and perhaps its original audience) with little to substantiate such a motive (Tristan Tzara came under heavy fire for writing a largely incomprehensible dada manifesto, his detractors attacking him for crystallizing what they perceived to be a fleeting and undocumentable ideal).

The point I wish to make is that interdisciplinarity as we know it was born of a historically situated socio-political desire. The avant-garde cannot deny its complicity with history, nor should we. But we live in a different time, a context radically different from those from which these movements emerged. The Futurists had a volatile audience that we do not – the protectors of culture and history, fully equipped with rotten fruit and harsh words, fully expecting to use them to their fullest and most violent extent (thus ironically constituting, for the Futurists, a stunning victory against the passivity that history and ‘culture’ induce). There are a number of intertwined cultural reasons for this, not the least of which is that they formed an actual movement that allowed a widely spread impact. A bunch of artists from various disciplines banded together and formed, over time, both a strong socio-cultural-political goal (to annihilate passivity), and an artistic means of trying to achieve it. This begs the question: what movement is underway in Toronto, or Canada, right now? Interdisciplinarity? No – this is a genre, and yes, genres do carry implicit socio-political underpinnings, but we live in an explicit world in which it sometimes feels that everyone is lobbying for a piece of the economic/popularity pie. Subtlety is lost in the diffuse throng of cultural struggle.

Josette Féral, a Quebecois scholar of note, wrote an article in 1992 entitled “What is Left of Performance Art? Autopsy of a Function, Birth of a Genre.” The title says it all – experimental work (performance art, interdisciplinarity, happenings, etc.) have been institutionalized both by the government (the Canada Council’s ‘inter-arts’ division) and by culture-at-large (‘Oh, is that like that guy who barfs and bleeds on famous paintings? Despicable, really...what’s for supper?’ or ‘I saw an experimental performance once. I didn’t get it...let’s go to the mall.’). Where it once had clearly defined functions (and, in some cases, still does), the accumulated history of the avant-garde, as disseminated and often vastly distorted by various forms of mass media, has altered its perception in the cultural arena – it is, I think, reduced and lumped together under the general headings of ‘undesirable’ and/or ‘inaccessible’, hence its institutionalization as a marginal form or genre (despite the fact that it encompasses such a wide variety of very different work).

Let us tie this tangent back to the question at hand. Why is it important to know one’s lineage? It is a question of language, of vocabulary. While critics and artists, throughout the accretion of about 100 years of avant-garde work may have constructed various languages through which

such experiments can be both constructed and articulated, how much of it is known and shared between present-day creators, and more importantly, how much of it is accessible to the general public in this vast urban metropolis? The answer to the latter question is quite obvious: little to none. This answer begs an explanation, a reason why – also obvious: they have little to no exposure to this specialized (in the sense that it must be developed and fostered) knowledge. If and when they are exposed, they easily reject it because they have no framework (read ‘language’) through which to interpret their experience, to understand it – a viciously circular conundrum, to say the least, for works that intentionally reject or try to transcend conventional channels of understanding.

This leads us to the second justification for knowing one’s lineage – to avoid incessantly ‘re-inventing the wheel’. While I am a proponent of the notion that artistic stasis is not desirable, it is important to question the motives behind such a position. I have most often heard this position expressed, as it concerns experimental work, from an older generation of artists who are watching a younger generation traverse many of the same paths they did decades ago. But is it not both inevitable and essential to build upon what has come before – inevitable because nothing occurs in a vacuum; essential because incessant originality or ‘newness’ leads to its own form of stasis in the sense that it can never take root, never grow, never become ‘meaningful’ (in the broadest sense of the word) to the general public. I think, and I hope that you agree, that there can be a happy medium in the sense that we, as artists, can build upon the past in order to effectively and productively respond to the present.

Unlike other revolutionary movements that have replaced old forms and taken up a position within dominant culture, the avant-garde has never done so, least of all in North America, as is presently illustrated by the relative lack of support for such work, both in terms of funding and box office. Granted, looking at it historically, these things take time, but the avant-garde is distinctly different from other revolutions of the performance world in one important way: it challenges the very foundations of the dominant form (hence its historical collusion with ‘formalism’). Before the Futurists, no movement had so thoroughly rejected such a wide breadth of inherited artistic conventions. 18<sup>th</sup> century Sentimentalism was the product of a moral revolution that saw the introduction of middle class characters and a new relationship between actor, character, and spectator; 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism was the product of the industrial revolution, striving for a sublime escape into the transcendental imagination that could not be bureaucratically and mechanistically institutionalized, and introduced the complexity of a co-existence of the ugly and the beautiful in a single entity (i.e. the hunchback of Notre-Dame); 20<sup>th</sup> century Naturalism was the product of the birth of positivism, of science, and a healthy desire to objectively show society to its inhabitants in order to foster a deeper understanding of its structures with the hopes of perfecting it, just like a scientific experiment. But none of these movements challenged, on the fundamental level of logic and linear narrative, its audience’s ability to interpret the medium, the story that communicated its message – in this way the avant-garde is uniquely situated.

This is the obstacle faced by contemporary experimental work, assuming that perpetual marginalization is undesirable. While some may perceive the value of an evocative lack of easily and conventionally consumable understanding, the vast majority need some convincing in this area. Its efficacy needs to somehow prove itself amongst a horde of lobbyists screaming so

loudly so as to be heard that one sometimes wonders if they can hear themselves. In this age of so many competing interests, we must prove ourselves in some way useful, indispensable even, to the sensibilities of the new millennium, for only dominant forms can rest on the luxury of not having to prove their worth, progressing along a sort of decadent 'art for art's sake' trajectory (as is the case with so much contemporary realism and musicals). Each of the historical movements outlined above were bolstered by well-formulated and explicit socio-political arguments distributed via pamphlets and manifestos (which, I sheepishly admit, this document will presently come to resemble). New languages, both artistic and socio-political, must be codified and disseminated or taught. It strikes me that there are two obvious courses of action (far from exhaustive): 1) work from within the languages of the mainstream in such a way that the work is 'legible enough' to be palatable to the general populace, thus mediating the dangers of being too easily 'written off', and once that's been accepted, push a little further; 2) join together as a movement (for there is contemporary truth to the 'strength in numbers' cliché), formulate a specific and comprehensive vision (a language) of what art should be doing in society, write it out as a manifesto and get it out there (the hard part, but nothing's impossible) so that people can understand why they didn't 'understand' the work via conventional channels and perhaps begin to nurture new means of perception.

This leads me to address the current vocabulary of experimental performance. The following quotes, taken from the write-ups in the Free Fall Festival's program/poster, are quite telling: "questions the very foundations of stage performance"; "creates an environment in which dance and theatre collide, crash, and beautifully explode"; "blurs the lines between individual physical space and social space"; "push[es] the boundaries of performance and its audience." The sections that I have italicized bear the distinct marks of an avant-garde vocabulary that has been in use and evolving for about 100 years. These are the things that bind us together in the present, and that indebt us to the past, whether we have knowledge of it or otherwise. But what lies under these lofty assertions, the nature and value of which are far from self-evident? How will these goals be enacted and how can we know if they've been either quantitatively or qualitatively achieved? To what social, cultural or political end are we questioning, exploding, blurring and pushing?

I do, of course, recognize that publicity writing carries with it distinct limitations that necessitate the brevity of summarization, but as individuals and as a community, can we articulate answers to these questions? If we can, I have yet to see widespread evidence of it. The stated intent of the round table discussion was to discuss "the impact of new performance ideas." Granted, to reign an 'open forum' in enough to squeeze out productive discourse is a difficult proposition, but the loss of such an opportunity is disheartening. If we are to glean the benefits of being a strong and healthy community, we desperately need to find a vocabulary (which is not to say that we all need to agree on everything) with which to discuss both the 'impact' and the fundamental justification of 'new performance ideas', not lament fully wallow in obscurity and marginalization because no one from outside the existing community showed up. Why would they, when as a community we could not find words to generate a provocative and sophisticated discourse around the thing to which we have devoted so much time and energy. We cannot blame this situation (in a defensive 'sour grapes' sort of way) entirely on lack of advertising and publicity. We must actively create a vocabulary that will entice those on the outside to take an interest in what we do without ever assuming that its value is self-evident to anyone but

ourselves. Art is in the service of society (this is not an advocacy of pandering to the lowest common denominator) – society is responsive and responsible to the artist only insofar as the artist (and his/her art) is responsive and responsible to society.

This, I would argue, is the justification for knowing our lineage, in terms of both artistic practice and, arguably more importantly, its historically conceived socio-political context and intended efficacy – its function. The role of the artist, as is either articulated or exemplified by notable historical figures (apologies for my theatre-centricity) from Plato and Aristotle to Victor Hugo, Emile Zola and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, encompasses that of cultural historian and philosopher. The particular constitution of the present, and its consequent needs and tastes, can only be effectively contextualized and productively exploited (in its non-derogatory connotation) when compared to that which it is not – the past. Our avant-garde lineage offers multitudes of successful and failed experimentation, all of which offers up to us a rich and complex matrix of words and concepts upon which we can build in an educated and strategic manner (if I were to write a supplement to this document, this would be the focus, and should definitely be the focus of future discussion). The socio-cultural past in general offers us a means of isolating and exploring what it is that society has become, what it is that we are, and where it is that we should go – all essential elements of being responsible to our society. This is why the rift between artists and scholars should be mended (in fact, they should, to some extent, be one and the same), for the best of each world are not so very far apart.

Finally, I'd like to raise (without really exploring) one final, independent yet connected issue concerning the possible dangers that come with the institutionalization of the term 'interdisciplinary'. All generic labels run a variety of risks – from validating the stagnation of artistic conventions to excusing one from actually critically discussing the work that one does – but 'interdisciplinary' is somewhat unique in that it does not refer to anything outside the art world (in the way that 'realism' refers to the reality of everyday life). It thus runs a grave risk, if not treated with care and vigilance, of instituting and perpetuating a self-validating artistic indulgence that could keep the works that are created under its banner forever marginalized. It is useful only insofar as it authorizes government support, but it will never be anything more than a vague and open-ended genre, it will never be a function – the locus of art's vitality and value. Without a function, art easily slips into the decadence of 'art for art's sake' – a thoroughly unethical and potentially dangerous force in society.

I sincerely hope that this document will provoke someone somewhere to further thought on issues of lineage, cultural legibility and vocabulary. This is far from an exhaustive survey of the challenges faced by interdisciplinary and experimental performance. Still, it is of vital importance alongside many others, not the least of which is the economic context in which the arts are currently situated – an issue too briefly raised at the discussion. I look forward to future discussion, and would welcome any critical counter-response to, or expansion upon, the arguments made and opinions expressed ([samstedman@hotmail.com](mailto:samstedman@hotmail.com)).